

# How to Make Mentoring Work

By W. Brad Johnson and Gene Andersen

GREAT MENTORS foster successful protégés, but as with any relationship, successful mentorships often develop spontaneously. Is legislating mentoring the answer?

In his *CNO Guidance for 2003* as Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Vern Clark specified that mentoring our Sailors should be a preeminent focus of the U.S. Navy. His guidance directed Navy leadership to help “create a mentoring culture.” Admiral Clark’s directive was squarely in line with contemporary research showing that mentored individuals enjoy several advantages over their non-mentored counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The relevance of mentoring to succession planning and the retention of key junior talent is now well established. Further, retrospective evidence from the Navy’s top brass seems to bolster sentiments that the best leaders often have some help getting to the top in the form of invested sponsors and mentors.<sup>2</sup>

Had Admiral Clark’s guidance stopped there, all might have been well. Navy leaders might have considered how best to encourage mentorship within the parameters of the Navy culture and the contexts of individual commands. But the CNO went on to direct the Navy to “assign a mentor for every service member by March 2003.” With these words, he set off a mad dash among senior commanders to create formal systems by which every Sailor would be designated both a protégé and assigned a mentor. The result is the Navy’s current hodgepodge of formal mentoring programs, many of which amount to little more than checklists. Too often, these programs are despised as onerous burdens by the very people they were intended to serve.

## Too Much of a Good Thing?

Admiral Clark should be applauded for recognizing the critical importance of a mentoring culture and for having the foresight to nudge the Navy in the direction of

more deliberate leader development. But did the CNO’s approach work for the Navy? In his 2004 *Guidance*, Admiral Clark reported that the Navy “took steps to ensure every Sailor has a mentor” and in his 2005 *Guidance*, he reported, “we built a mentoring culture.” Four years later, we are unable to find much evidence to support these claims. Meanwhile, grumbling about formalized mentoring requirements in the Fleet is reaching fever pitch. With considerable research evidence indicating that legislating mentorship rarely works, the Navy should be wary of “one size fits all” mandatory mentoring programs.

## Why Mentoring Matters

Mentoring is a developmental relationship, one that permits mentors to become invested in the career progression and development of the protégé and often provide essential functions such as counsel, challenge, and support. Mentorships often become enduring friendships, even after the active phase of the relationship has ended.

How important is mentoring to a successful career? The evidence is in: Having a mentor is associated with more rapid promotion, greater productivity, and professional confidence, less job-related stress, and even a better chance of becoming eminent in one’s field.<sup>3</sup> Business leaders recognize that developing promising junior talent can create substantial long-term dividends in the form of succession planning, increased retention, stronger commitment and citizenship behavior, and acceleration of diversity.

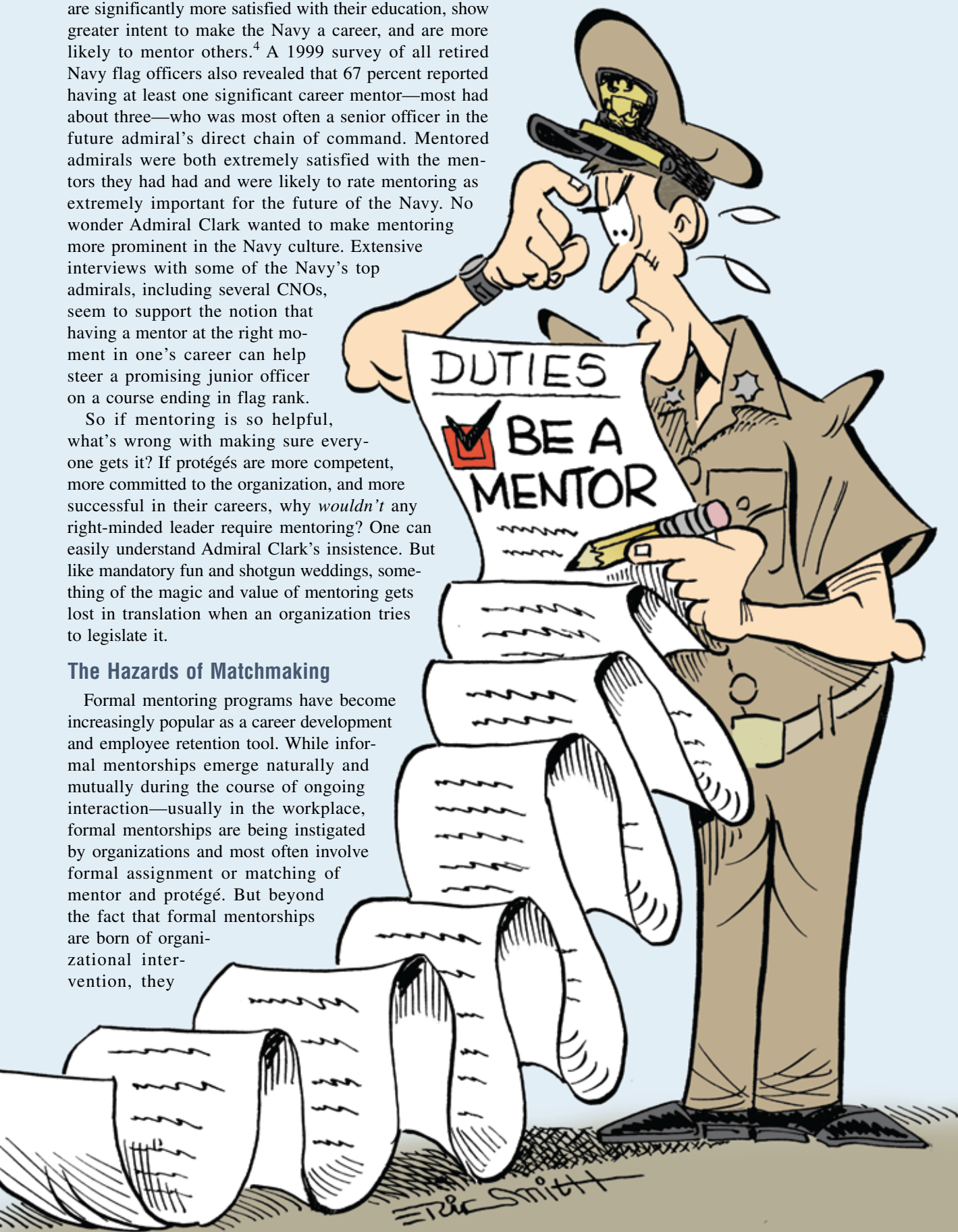
The same is true in the Navy. Mentored personnel report having better personal and career outcomes. Among midshipmen at the Naval Academy, those with a mentor

are significantly more satisfied with their education, show greater intent to make the Navy a career, and are more likely to mentor others.<sup>4</sup> A 1999 survey of all retired Navy flag officers also revealed that 67 percent reported having at least one significant career mentor—most had about three—who was most often a senior officer in the future admiral's direct chain of command. Mentored admirals were both extremely satisfied with the mentors they had had and were likely to rate mentoring as extremely important for the future of the Navy. No wonder Admiral Clark wanted to make mentoring more prominent in the Navy culture. Extensive interviews with some of the Navy's top admirals, including several CNOs, seem to support the notion that having a mentor at the right moment in one's career can help steer a promising junior officer on a course ending in flag rank.

So if mentoring is so helpful, what's wrong with making sure everyone gets it? If protégés are more competent, more committed to the organization, and more successful in their careers, why *wouldn't* any right-minded leader require mentoring? One can easily understand Admiral Clark's insistence. But like mandatory fun and shotgun weddings, something of the magic and value of mentoring gets lost in translation when an organization tries to legislate it.

### The Hazards of Matchmaking

Formal mentoring programs have become increasingly popular as a career development and employee retention tool. While informal mentorships emerge naturally and mutually during the course of ongoing interaction—usually in the workplace, formal mentorships are being instigated by organizations and most often involve formal assignment or matching of mentor and protégé. But beyond the fact that formal mentorships are born of organizational intervention, they





U.S. NAVY (KAREN E. BERT)

**TAKING TIME** Spontaneous, one-on-one mentoring often produces better results than formal programs. Captain Yolanda Reagans congratulates a Navy Junior Reserve Officer Corps Cadet on her acceptance to the U.S. Naval Academy.

share few features in common. For instance, there is wide variability among mentoring programs with respect to level of facilitation by organizational representatives, the presence and quality of training for participants, expectations for meeting frequency, and the specific focus of mentoring.

Given this variability and the perception that involvement is obligatory, it should come as no surprise that the results are equally mixed. Protégés in informal mentorships consistently report greater satisfaction and having more support from their mentors than those in formally arranged mentorships.<sup>5</sup> The fact that formal mentoring is consistently less effective than informal mentoring may be due to the way in which mentors gravitate toward their protégés. According to C. M. Underhill, in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, in informal mentoring, mentors and protégés select each other due to mutual attraction, similar interests, and personality characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Some variables seem to predict better mentoring results in formal mentorships. For example, the perception on the part of both mentors and protégés that they are voluntary participants and that both parties contributed to the matching process in important ways.<sup>7</sup> Mentor commitment to the program, the quality of mentor training, and the frequency

of interaction also appear to contribute to the quality and value of formal mentoring programs. One intriguing finding from the mentoring research is that although mentors respond favorably to management support for mentoring, they report being less willing to mentor as their perceived accountability in the relationship increases. Thus, the more organizational programs engage in greater oversight, assessment, and management of the mentoring process, the less willing mentors are to participate.

Formal mentorships are thus often less effective than naturally occurring ones, and when an organization does launch a formal mentoring system, it is never a good idea to require participation. Mandatory mentoring elicits the same sort of resistance that assigning friends or spouses might engender. And there is more: formally assigned mentorships result in a greater frequency of what some experts refer to as *marginal mentoring*—lousy, disengaged mentoring that in many cases is worse than no mentoring at all. Perhaps this is why junior officers often detest formal mentoring programs and instead want senior officers to offer mentoring as part of a broader commitment to leader development.

In our view, the Navy—like many organizations—has moved prematurely in the direction of legislating mentor-



ship without first conceptualizing it in relation to its long-term objectives and strategies. In a perfect world, an organization would create a corporate level mentoring strategy before implementing a formal mentoring program.

## Frequent Problems in Formal Mentoring Programs

Although good mentoring is undeniably useful, formalizing the process poses quandaries for any organization. As the Navy reconsiders its approach, here are some tensions that it should address.

*The term “mentoring” is rarely defined.* Although CNO Clark charged the Navy to go forth and mentor, he neglected to specify what he meant by mentoring. The term means different things to different leaders and may run the gamut from one-time career advice to a long-term and emotionally meaningful relationship. Terms such as role model, coach, sponsor, supervisor, adviser, and counselor are often used interchangeably with mentor. The Navy will need to begin with a coherent operational definition of the concept.

*A successful Navy mentoring approach must carefully consider the terms it employs.*

Like it or not, the term mentoring often evokes powerfully negative reactions—especially among more senior naval personnel. For some the term is synonymous with

favoritism, cronyism, and inequity. Because not everyone gets mentored, those that do are seen as enjoying an unfair advantage in the form of powerful career leverage. For instance, a secret fraternity of Naval Academy graduates, self-dubbed the “Green Bowlers,” aroused fierce condemnation in the early 20th century by helping one another achieve promotion in the Fleet.<sup>8</sup>

*Not everyone has what it takes to mentor.* Let’s face it, some people are good at relationships and some are not. We have all seen Navy leaders who were great with machines but lousy—even abusive—with people. It would be a terrible mistake to assume that everyone can or should be a mentor. A good mentoring program will encourage personnel to seek mentorship from senior leaders with a history of excellence in this area. The Navy must address issues of selection and competence as it creates a Navy-wide mentoring approach.

*The best mentors quickly burn out.* Excellent mentoring consumes precious time and energy. If not everyone in the Fleet is a viable mentor and if the Navy is going to ask its best mentors to do more, then there is an increased risk of burnout and attrition among these all-star talent developers. Owing to the Navy’s pyramidal structure, this would be a particular risk at the higher ranks; for instance, getting every captain mentored would require every active-



**DUE PRAISE** In 2003 Admiral Vern Clark proposed that the Navy create a “mentoring culture.” Above right, he readministers oaths of enlistment to newly promoted Petty Officer 1st Class Yenier Ramirez-Cruz (left) and Chief Petty Officer James A. Gray during a Recruiters of the Year ceremony.

duty admiral to mentor at least ten captains. How can the Navy effectively recognize and protect its best mentors?

## Doing It Right

*Should every Sailor have a mentor?* Formalized programs often hinge on this assumption when, in fact, a proportion of personnel in most organizations neither want nor seem to respond to traditional mentoring. Further, by its very nature, mentoring suggests an exclusive relationship—typically initiated by a mentor who sees unusual promise in a subordinate. If mentoring permits organizations to identify and nurture exceptional junior talent in the service of succession planning, then it would make more sense to encourage broad support and career development for all personnel and specialized mentoring only for the most promising new members.

*Not all mentoring takes place in traditional one-to-one relationships.* Although the image of the wise mentor nurturing a single



## Electromentoring

By Captain Lisa Franchetti, U.S. Navy

**M**entoring can be a tough nut to crack, and, just like anything in life, what works for one person may not work for another. Perhaps the best solution for a diverse organization such as the Navy will be to offer a variety of options, while working to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. Sometimes it just takes a little unexpected interest from a senior in your field to help you get the information you need to work through some tough choices and decisions.

Being mentored can take the form of an impromptu conversation with someone who's "been there," or it can evolve into a more formal relationship with someone at your command or through your career development board. With today's connectivity, mentoring relationships can come in many forms and last for a few months or many years. Traditional face-to-face meetings, e-mail exchanges, phone calls, and communication pieces designed for

a specific demographic can all play a prominent role in mentoring.

The Navy has recognized this and is considering several different approaches to mentoring.

"Network News," an e-mail newsletter geared toward women surface warfare officers, was begun in 2003 by Rear Admiral Deborah Loewer and has evolved into a great resource for women SWOs under the Surface Warfare Enterprise leadership. The network has connected folks who might not otherwise have met and fostered the opportunity for informal—but invaluable—mentoring. (For more information, contact [kim.thompson1@navy.mil](mailto:kim.thompson1@navy.mil)).

Another initiative, the "NavyWomen eMentor Leadership Program," is being developed and administered by the Office of Women's Policy and the nonprofit professional development organization, AcademyWomen. The program's purpose is to

connect active duty and Reserve women officers and Sailors with other women outside their chain of command for career guidance, advice, support, and mentorship. In this Web-based program, users log on to the eMentor Leadership Program site and create a personal profile. As part of the enrollment process, mentees select learning needs or areas in which they seek mentoring from a bank of possible topics such as support through a transition, help planning the next career move, developing new technical or leadership skills, or gaining work life balance tips.

Mentors view the same bank of "competencies" and choose those in which they have expertise. The mentee is then presented with a list of prospective mentors whose competencies best match their learning needs. The mentee can then review any of the mentors' bios on the list and select one to invite into a mentoring relationship. The



**BRINGING THEM ALONG** Over the years a Sailor will benefit from brief meetings with many mentors. Here, NASA Mission Specialist and retired U.S. Navy Captain Wendy Lawrence talks with midshipmen about life as a naval officer during a conference at the U.S. Naval Academy.

novice over an extended period is the dominant model of mentorship, researchers are increasingly promoting the notion of a developmental network or constellation.<sup>9</sup> Rather than place the entire burden for career and personal development on one mentor, organizations should recognize the value of multiple short-term mentors, peer mentors, mentoring groups, and even online mentoring support. The Navy would be well-served by taking a broader network perspective on mentoring.

*It may be unwise to confine mentoring to one's command.* Formal mentoring programs in the Navy often assume that effective mentoring occurs within the sponsoring command. But matching mentors and protégés within a chain-of-command raises the risk of conflicts between the mentor's supervisory/evaluative and developmental roles with a protégé, not to mention concerns about

fraternization and protégés' legitimate worries about confidentiality. The Navy should also offer the option of lateral assignments to other divisions if not entirely separate commands, as well as the possibility of incorporating retirees and civilians as potential mentors, depending on the nature of the command.

*Greater organizational oversight facilitates interaction but diminishes mentor motivation.* It is a paradox that when organizations are more involved in matching mentors and protégés, providing training, and then overseeing the mentor-protégé interactions, there are fewer negative mentoring outcomes—from the protégés' perspectives—yet considerably more resistance on the part of mentors. Scrutiny by the organization seems to diminish pleasure and motivation on the part of the mentor. Any formal mentoring program must tread the fine line between assistance and intrusion.

*Requiring an intrinsically motivated behavior may backfire.* It is a cruel truth that telling someone to do what they love to do, perhaps even making it a job and paying them for it, often backfires and actually decreases the pleasure and satisfaction the person originally found in the activity. Called the *overjustification effect* in psychology, this principle explains why it may be a terrible mistake to tell the Navy's best mentors that they "must" mentor.<sup>10</sup> When

eMentor Leadership Program website has a variety of helpful utilities and resources to assist the matched mentor and mentee with communication, planning and consistency in their mentoring relationship.

As Fleet interest in electronic mentoring was untested, the pilot program was designed to accommodate only 500 mentors and mentees. Within a few weeks of the October 2008 launch, participation far exceeded capacity and the program was expanded to accommodate more than 800 mentors and mentees. Although still in its pilot phase, the Office of Women's Policy reports that users of the eMentor program have expressed great satisfaction with both the resources provided by the program and with their eMentoring experience. Pending a successful evaluation of the pilot program, the Navy hopes to expand this program to a larger audience and is, in fact, starting a differ-

ent pilot program. To learn more, contact Lieutenant Brill at the Office of Women's Policy, [elizabeth.brill@navy.mil](mailto:elizabeth.brill@navy.mil).

The Commander, Naval Surface Forces (CNSF) launched an eMentor portal for all Surface Warfare Officers in late January, using the same basic software platform as the NavyWomen eMentor Leadership Program. The program works in the same way and has been tailored to address the

means will be encouraging both mentors and mentees to sign up. Contact CNSF for more information: Lieutenant Commander Mark Haney at [mark.haney@navy.mil](mailto:mark.haney@navy.mil).

These are a few of the new initiatives. A quick look around the Fleet and on Navy Knowledge Online reveals there are many others out there actively engaged in mentoring programs.

Mentoring—and being mentored—is

a time-consuming, intensely personal commitment to a fellow Sailor, but it is well worth the time and energy. As the Navy continues to provide more methods and opportunities for mentoring, it will afford more

Sailors the invaluable benefits of being mentored.



potential mentoring needs of SWOs. This pilot program will have a large number of initial spots, with the potential for expansion depending on the response. CNSF will be publicizing this effort at the annual Surface Navy Symposium and through other

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a mentor cares for junior personnel because he or she finds it inherently gratifying, it will often be counterproductive to begin legislating and scrutinizing this behavior.

*The quality of training can make or break a program's success.* Good mentoring requires the best education and training. Leaving mentor preparation efforts to individual commands will almost certainly sabotage the efficacy of formal programs. Providing consistent mentor training—including applied skill development tools—at key career points would ease the burden on individual commands and ensure more consistent training.

*Frequent duty-station changes make traditional mentoring difficult.* While traditional models of mentoring are predicated on a time frame spanning several years, a comprehensive program for Navy personnel must account for frequent moves and greater frequency but briefer of mentorships.

Since the CNO's 2003 *Guidance*, there has been little effort to take stock of our mentoring approach. It's time to consider what is working and what is not and to refine our approach. A coherent Navy vision and strategy coupled with a continuum of program options allowing flexibility at the level of individual commands should help to ensure that mentoring is not just a fad but a core element of Navy culture. ✱

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